

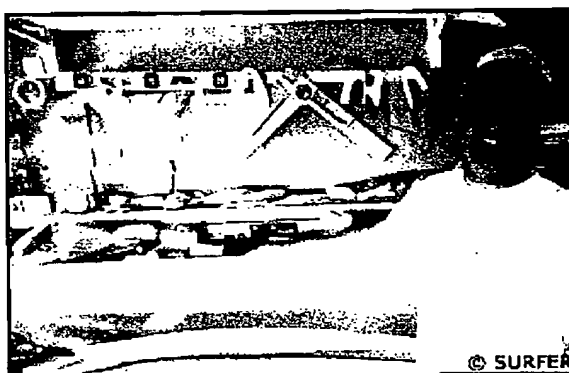
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Feature

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Clark Foam Apocalypse: Some Board Builders See Light Ahead While Clamoring to Fill Clark Foam Voidby
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SURFER Magazine Editor

Timmy Patterson in less hectic times.

"This would have been tough even with six months warning," said Brad Basham, owner of Basham's Surfboard Factory in San Clemente, California. Until Monday, he was the Clark Foam distributor in the area, a role that helped support his surfboard-glassing business as well as dozens of small and large surfboard labels in South Orange County. "But now, to have the rug pulled out from under you overnight without as much as a phone call or anything is pretty devastating."

Basham, like hundreds of surfboard manufacturers across the U.S. and the world, faces the major dilemma in the days ahead of finding a new life source. Over the past 40 years 80% of the global surfboard market has set up its livelihood along the banks of the river of foam that Gordon "Grubby" Clark had created with his Laguna Niguel company, Clark Foam, which cranked out 700 to 1,000 blanks per day. On Monday that river ran dry, leaving thousands to scurry for a new source.

"Yesterday was a shock," said Timmy Patterson. "Now it's just the mad scramble to figure out where we're going."

Phones have been ringing off the hook to smaller blank suppliers in Australia, Brazil and South Africa, as every last one is being bought up. In the meantime, back on the home front, panicked surfers are sensing a looming board shortage, and retailers have already noticed a huge spike in board sales. "We've had a couple days to mull it over now," said Sean Mattison of Surf Ride in Oceanside, Calif., who stocks more than 50 brands of surfboards in his shops. "At first we thought we were going to have to raise prices, then we didn't, now we're just waiting to see what each brand is doing. Some of them are raising prices on us, others aren't, but sales are still

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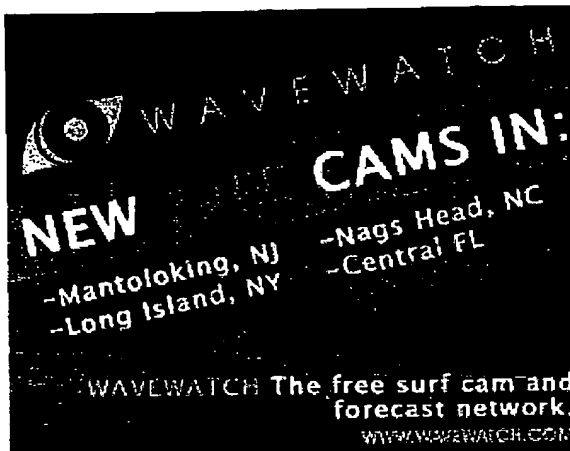
Board Builders Clark Foam Fiasco

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spiking. People realize if they don't have a good board now it could be a while."

Yet it may not be as long as everyone thought. While the list of potential blank suppliers is a short one, capitalist forces have been turned into overdrive since the news of Clark Foam's shut-down. Exhibit A is what's happening at Walker Foam in Wilmington, Calif. Harold Walker was one of the first suppliers of foam blanks back in the '60s, but later became a casualty of the powerful Clark Foam business machine. He's since returned on a smaller scale, and six months ago began ramping up a new facility in China that will import polyurethane blanks, the same type Clark Foam made. When news came down Monday of Clark's closure they sped up the building process,

immediately taking over on their next-door neighbor in China to make room for more machinery. Back in the States, they hired renowned shaper Gary Linden to help run operations.



"It's amazing how fast this is all happening," said Linden. "I started here on Tuesday, the day after the news broke and was immediately brought up to speed. The China factory is near complete, and once it is we think we'll be able to meet demand in about two months." When asked about the variety of product he'll have available he noted, "We'll have anywhere between 35-50 plugs ready to go, from 6' 4" to 10' 8" and we will be able to do custom rockers back in our Wilmington plant."

Walker isn't alone. Out in Temecula a small operation called Just Foam is reportedly claiming they will be able to produce 1,000 blanks per month, which will do its part to relieve the pain. Meanwhile, companies like XTR in Oceanside are experiencing a huge peak in interest in their extruded polystyrene (XTR) blanks, which are similar to those Patagonia was championing back when they sold blanks. "Interest was already rising before Monday," said Javier Huarcaya, owner of the company. "Now it's really picking up. I'm doing stuff with Merrick, Lost, Brewer." But, Javier warns, "People have to understand though, that we're not talking huge numbers. The glassing process is a complex one that we've patented, and it's not going to replace polyurethane anytime soon."

The scramble is a bit of a reality check for most, as they suddenly realize where they stand in the popularity contest. "I sell as many blanks as Merrick," says Basham. "But nobody knows who I am because I don't have the marketing machine Al has. I can't even get the Australian suppliers on the phone yet because they don't know me. I know I'll be OK in the long run, but a lot of little guys who depend on us will not make it through this."

But with the foam dust starting to settle now there's a little less gloom and doom being tossed around, and a little more optimism as new alternatives and options are being explored. "When it comes right down to it this is healthy," said Matt Biolos of ...lost surfboards. "It's like daddy telling us to all grow up and become more self-reliant. I mean, yeah, it's gonna hurt in the short term but in a few years we may have a healthier surfboard industry because of it."

But, many add, there is a huge sense of loss. "It almost feels like a death in the family," said Dave Parmenter. "The thing people are going to miss is the personal service that Clark was able to give even the little guy. That operation was one of the most efficient you'll find anywhere. You'd put your order in for a specific density, stringer width, type of wood and customize the rocker, and someone would deliver it to your door within a couple weeks. I don't know if we're ever going to see that again."

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